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Supporting Economic Growth through Local Workforce Development Board Sponsorship of Registered Apprenticeship Programs

A Case Study Involving the West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Board

Introduction

The West Michigan Works! Workforce Development Board (referred to as “the Board”) is one of sixteen Local Workforce Development Boards in the State of Michigan, located in Western Michigan and serving seven counties over a wide geographic area. The Board works in partnership with employers, educators, economic developers, and community organizations to create a qualified workforce that meets their region’s current and future talent needs and fuels their shared economic future. It is this partnership that spearheaded the exploration of Board-sponsored Registered Apprenticeship programs in mid-2015, beginning with the occupation of Medical Assistant.

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Background

The Board was initiating conversations with employers in the healthcare industry at the same time they were rolling out *Industry Talent Councils*, consisting of multiple industry stakeholders, one of which pertained to healthcare. (The Healthcare Talent Council is referred to as the West Michigan Health Careers Council.) Similar stories of healthcare worker shortages were relayed that included the “borrowing” of talent from other healthcare entities for perhaps \$.10 more per hour to meet the demand. Thus, many partners were involved in early discussions regarding how to address the shortage of healthcare workers. Registered Apprenticeship became a topic of discussion because local healthcare employers wanted to develop more opportunities for entry-level, incumbent workers to be promoted into high-demand, high-wage positions within their organization, such as Medical Assistants (MA). The Board presented an “earn and learn” training option and discussed potential funding available to help offset the cost of developing a new Registered Apprenticeship program. **In support of the healthcare industry council’s interest to learn more about registered apprenticeships, the Board reached out to an Apprenticeship Training Representative (ATR) in the Michigan USDOL Office of Apprenticeship to discuss the possibility of beginning an MA program in just a few months.** The three initial healthcare employers were concerned about the start-up process and short turnaround that involved developing Standards of Apprenticeship for the three proposed programs.

However, as opposed to having three sets of Standards of Apprenticeship for the same occupation, the Board believed it made more sense for them to draft and hold the Standards of Apprenticeship for the employers, significantly simplifying the process¹. According to the Board, this was one more service they could offer to employers and the business community at no charge. It made good business sense.

All parties wanted to get started right away. The Board involved Talent Solutions staff that included Career Coaches, a training consultant, Service Center managers², in addition to a lead Business Services Representative. Involving these staff from the outset would help facilitate the development of internal processes. Information sessions were held during the day and evening hours and attended by the Career Coaches. When job seekers left, they were equipped with all the information they needed about the program and were able to meet with the employers and local community college representatives. Each

¹ The Board was suggesting a *Group Non-Joint Program* because it involved multiple employers and did not involve collective bargaining (i.e., was non-joint). Registered Apprenticeship programs (RAPs) can be one of the following: Group Non-Joint; Group Joint; Individual Non-Joint (one employer) and; Individual Joint. In all cases, the RAP will consist of an on-the-job learning component and a related instruction component.

² Michigan refers to its American Job Centers as “Service Centers.”

was assigned a Career Coach to assist them through the pre-screening process. By the time of the second cohort, the Board had a process in place and received 492 applications of interest for 45 slots in the program across the three employers. **Thus, WIOA was involved from the very beginning with the employer on-boarding process.** Furthermore, as a result of the MA Registered Apprenticeship program model, the State of Michigan Workforce Development Agency assisted in funding an “Apprenticeship Success Coordinator” role for each of the Michigan Works! agencies through a State Apprenticeship Expansion grant.

Continuous Improvement

The Board utilized feedback from employers and the community college, which was providing the related instruction component of the program, to build additional steps into their process.

The Board convened employers and the three local community colleges, to review, revise, and approve a curriculum model for the related instruction component of the program. After attending an information session, interested applicants would go back to the WMW! Jobs Center to work on creating their career portfolio, consisting of a resume, cover letter, career pathway plan, references, and assessment scores. Assessments included a typing skills test, digital literacy, and a college entrance assessment, all of which took 2-3 hours. Applicants had two opportunities to pass, and remediation was available. (This is where the Board began to see a natural whittling down of the applicant pool.) The remaining prospective apprentices developed a user account for the State’s “Labor Exchange System,” called *Pure MI Talent Connect*, and were administered a WorkKeys assessment or Accuplacer depending on the college with a certain minimum score required. At that point, applicants, many of which were WIOA participants, attended a series of workshops with the Career Coaches to assist them in building their own career pathway (e.g., perhaps completion of the MA Registered Apprenticeship program was a first step in their desired pathway), concluding with a formal application to one of the three healthcare employers.

The entire screening process was 4-6 weeks, and fees for all assessments were covered with the Board’s braided funding model that included WIOA funds. Fine-tuning of the program continued to occur, including the transition of the pre-screening process to an online portal created by West Michigan Works! staff. This allowed the job seekers to complete the screening process on their own time and avoid challenges with childcare or other barriers to in-person workshops and sessions. The transition of the related instruction to a hybrid approach was due to COVID-19, otherwise it would be in-person instruction two days per week at specific times. The Apprenticeship Success Coordinator (funded with multiple sources, including WIOA) managed and continues to manage the project for the Board, which includes program administration and data entry into the Department’s national RAPIDS management information system (Registered Apprenticeship Partners Information Data System). To date, in the six years that the Board has been sponsoring the MA Registered Apprenticeship program, there have been over 130 successful completers.

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Taking Advantage of Positive Feedback and Forward Momentum

The tremendous feedback regarding the MA Registered Apprenticeship program prompted the Board to engage their *Industry Talent Council* in Manufacturing. The Board connected with the same ATR they had worked with on the MA program and began involving him in the employer-led Talent Council discussions. They discussed needs over the next five years and how Registered Apprenticeship might be an appropriate talent development solution. Thereafter, discussions focused on entry-level positions that made sense in machining, maintenance, and welding. The same general process and stakeholder involvement were subsequently utilized with the Construction Trades and Information Technology sector.

As of September 2021, the Board’s Registered Apprenticeship program consists of 28 occupations across four industries as follows:

Indicators across Industries and Results

	Healthcare	Advanced Manufacturing	Construction	Information Technology	Total
Sponsored Occupations	4	18	4	2	28
Participating Employers	4	29	8	6	57
Active Apprentices	19	67	5	1	92
Apprentices Since Inception	173	142	30	7	352
Apprentice Completions Since Inception	130	35	23	4	192

A Future Focus

Currently, the Board is looking at quality pre-apprenticeship programs as a strategic approach to supporting Diversity and Inclusion efforts by preparing individuals, particularly those from underrepresented populations or with less access to Registered Apprenticeship opportunities, to enter into and succeed in Registered Apprenticeship programs.

When staff recently interviewed Kelly Tang, the Apprenticeship Success Coordinator for West Michigan Works!, about WIOA integration and Board sponsorship of RAPs, here’s how she responded to the following questions:

Why Registered Apprenticeship? – To decrease the burden on employers; to provide Local Board involvement, direction, and leadership under the WIOA umbrella; to increase career pathways and certificate attainment; and to increase the presence of the Registered Apprenticeship model within non-traditional industries.

What were some of the Action Steps taken by the Board to integrate Registered Apprenticeship into the design and delivery of WIOA-funded programs? – We adopted an employer-focused, demand-driven approach; we analyzed labor market data and trends; we rolled out our sector strategy development with employer-led consortia, we *intentionally* integrated Registered Apprenticeship programming into our service delivery approaches; and we partnered with the USDOL Office of Apprenticeship and representatives of the State of Michigan Workforce Development Agency.

What are some of the impacts of Registered Apprenticeship on service design and service delivery? – The integration of Registered Apprenticeship into WIOA service design and delivery has led to the accelerated advancement and growth of industry sector councils; industry sector development has given us the opportunity to recruit and market programs to employers and job seekers regionally; we have moved from a *case management* to a *career coaching* model; it has bolstered our relationships with the employer community significantly; it has enhanced career pathway development; it has helped us increase the recruitment of underrepresented populations; and Registered Apprenticeship has become an institutionalized part of our “business services” toolkit.

How would you describe the BENEFITS of Registered Apprenticeship Program SPONSORSHIP to other Local Boards across the country? – It supports the development of a systematic solution to challenges facing both businesses and workers in their sector of focus; expanding workforce intermediary functions can provide employers with a high-quality, high-touch customer service experience; you’re developing employment opportunities that will keep talent local; it supports increased Board performance on WIOA required indicators; it enables the leveraging of multiple resources to comprehensively serve an individual or an employer; there are continued and much deeper collaborations with educators, employers, community partners and USDOL.”

For more information on how West Michigan Works! utilizes Registered Apprenticeship to support economic development and increase outcomes on WIOA required indicators, please contact the West Michigan Works! Apprenticeship Success team at apprenticeship@westmiworks.org.